

Is it Possible to Successfully Teach Oversized Classes?

By Mirjana Gluscevic

The role of the teacher is, of course, to teach. The role of a teacher who uses the communicative approach is to help students communicate in one, two, or all four of the language skills, preferably speaking. Teaching anything to a large number of students is a very difficult task. However, the teacher who finds himself/herself teaching classes of about 100 to 150 students faces a real challenge.

Compulsory foreign languages at the University of Belgrade were reintroduced in 1988 with two-year courses of English, Russian, French, and German language; however, languages at the School of Medicine did not start until 1989. Courses were two hours: one lecture hour and one hour of practical work and exercises. The contents of the English language course were based on the programme of ESP studies and presupposed at least two to four years of high school English.

The total number of students that enroll at the School of Medicine is rather large and rising every year. Therefore, the number of students who wish to continue their English language studies is increasing each year. Taking into consideration the fact that English seems to be the prevalent language in the academic population, we find about two-thirds of the students select English as a foreign language for their studies. This is about 600 students per year.

Groups are formed according to the standard procedure for basic medical subjects of the first and second year. Time and space capacities and the budget, etc., are limiting factors in planning and establishing the different schedules. These are some of the decisive elements that caused oversized classes.

In such conditions the teacher must face the difficult issue of organizing and teaching these large classes. The easiest method would be to give lectures on English language in general, or on English language in Medicine and forget about practical work and exercises. But, a teacher favouring the communicative approach cannot do that. Being the only teacher of English employed at the School of Medicine at the time and having no assistance, I had to deal with the challenge immediately.

The Rationale of Using Student Assistants in Teaching

For years the School of Medicine at the University of Belgrade has used student assistants, called demonstrators, for a large number of basic medical subjects. Here was a solution which only had to be applied to the teaching of English.

a. Selection of student assistants. Assistants are students who have completed a two-year course of English in Medicine and have passed the final exam with the highest mark. They may also

have spent some time in an Anglophone country. This qualifies them to apply for the positions of assistants. However, the teacher makes the final choice.

b. Teaching process and how student assistants fit in. The assistants are used only during the one hour of practical work. Every text and grammar unit (functional or structural) must be prepared beforehand with the assistants. During the lecture the teacher introduces the new text, explains it, connects it with the use of structures or functions, and gives certain examples. After that the teacher withdraws and lets the assistants carry on with the work.

The role of the teacher in this part of the teaching process is to supervise and guide the work of the assistants who move from one group to the other and intervene where and when necessary.

Experience has proved that student assistants are very good in helping students with translation from English into our language, grammar drills, and free or guided conversation.

Advantages of having assistants

One of the main advantages of this technique is in being able to teach in small groups. Since the course is based on the communicative approach, we have succeeded in engaging almost all students actively in the activities. A three-way communication among assistants, students, and the teacher results in a more natural environment.

Secondly, as this is a specialized course of English in Medicine, it has proved very advantageous to have assistants who are also students of medicine and can provide explanations and information regarding medical contents of the textbook. They are also more inclined to elaborate on specific topics, thereby assisting the teacher.

Thirdly, we have noticed that students speak more freely with their older fellow colleagues and that learners get individual attention in small groups.

Finally, small groups can be formed according to the level of English and be formed again if necessary. Several small groups are formed depending on the number of assistants that are employed. Practical work and exercises are done within these small groups.

Disadvantages of having assistants

Since the assistants are not language teachers, they are not always able to correct student errors. Also, they may make errors themselves. This problem needs to be faced and resolved. However, it seems to be a good idea to let certain errors pass uncorrected, and let students acquire, as much as possible, fluent speech. We have noticed that students get rather self-conscious and shy when talking English if they are corrected all the time.

Conclusion

My seven years of experience has shown that there are more advantages than disadvantages. As we have a three-way communication in the classes, we create an almost natural ambience where roles get interchanged, so that everybody teaches and learns.

The results are visible during classes, and exam scores show that we have a very good rate of high marks. Assistants also gain much from their experiences in classes. They get teaching practice and develop fluency in speaking. Students are able to participate in class activities and to communicate in English. As for the teacher s/he does not give lectures on the language but teaches.

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